

Australian police carry out sweeping new “anti-terror” raids

Mike Head
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In the second largest police-intelligence raids ever conducted in Australia, around 400 officers searched 19 homes across Melbourne and a nearby country town at dawn yesterday, arresting four Lebanese- and Somali-Australians for questioning over alleged plans to attack a Sydney army base.

Neighbours in Melbourne’s northern working class suburbs told reporters that riot police armed with automatic weapons arrived from 4 am, bashing on doors to demand entry.

The operation, conducted by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), Victoria Police, New South Wales Police, the NSW Crime Commission and the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), marks the first large-scale use under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s Labor government of the sweeping “terrorism” legislation that Labor has retained from the previous Howard government.

Many details of the allegations against the detained men remain unclear. Nayas El Sayed, 25, was brought before a court late yesterday, charged with “conspiring” to commit an act in preparation for “a terrorist act”. Conspiracy is a notoriously vague charge.

Three other men, all in their 20s, were similarly charged this morning, after being held without charge for extended questioning. A magistrate, Peter Reardon, yesterday granted police a further eight hours of questioning under the terror laws, on top of an initial four hours. A fifth man, already in jail on an assault charge, underwent interrogation as well.

One of the detainees, boilermaker Saney Aweyz, strenuously denied any involvement in the alleged plot and accused the police of preventing him from sleeping. Aweyz complained that police had put him in a “small room” where it was impossible to sleep because there were bright lights and police surrounding him.

Prosecutor Nick Robinson SC alleged that the men had planned to enter the Holsworthy military base and kill as many army personnel as possible before dying as “self-proclaimed martyrs”. The prosecutor refused to give detailed

evidence, however, saying the police operation was continuing.

The police alleged that the men are supporters of a group called Al Shabaab (Arabic for “youth”). Authorities in the US and Australia have depicted the organisation as the Somali branch of Al Qaeda, although it has not been designated as “terrorist” in Australia.

From what has been presented thus far, the evidence is scant and circumstantial. One of the men is suspected of travelling to Somalia for two months this year to attend a training camp. Another was recorded visiting Holsworthy, which is home to some of the military’s elite units—the airborne battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, the 2nd Commando Regiment and an SAS counter-terrorism unit.

The men have reportedly been under close surveillance for seven months. The operation included monitoring conversations at mosques, phone-tapping of members of the Lebanese and Somali communities, and physical tailing of the arrested men. Victorian police commissioner Simon Overland spoke of a “massive physical and electronic surveillance operation”.

Despite this close monitoring, the police claimed that they had to move urgently because they had no way of knowing whether an attack was imminent. Electronic surveillance reportedly discovered conversations about obtaining weapons, but the police have produced no evidence that the men had arms.

At a media conference, police chiefs nevertheless declared that the arrests had prevented attacks that would have been the worst on Australian soil. AFP acting chief commissioner Tony Negus said the alleged terrorist act “could have claimed many lives”.

The police operation bears remarkable similarities to those conducted under the Howard government, including the November 2005 raids, in which more than 600 officers arrested 22 Muslim men just after Prime Minister John Howard recalled parliament to bolster the terrorism laws.

Claiming there was an imminent terrorist threat, Howard, backed by Labor and the Greens, pushed through a change to

the wording of all offences from “the” to “a” terrorist act. The effect of the amendment was to allow the police to arrest and charge people without any concrete evidence of a specific terrorist plot. That provision was used immediately against the 2005 suspects and is being applied to those arrested yesterday.

Rudd, like Howard, publicly welcomed the arrests. At his own media conference yesterday, he praised the police and ASIO, suggested that those detained were indeed guilty, and declared that the alleged plot demonstrated the necessity to continue the war on terrorism, both at home and abroad.

The prime minister seized upon the arrests to counter growing opposition to Labor’s indefinite commitment of increasing numbers of troops to bolster the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. “Afghanistan cannot be surrendered as a training base of unlimited potential to terrorists as it was prior to 2001,” Rudd declared, despite the lack of evidence linking the arrested men, or the Al Shabaab group, to Afghanistan.

Like previous terrorism raids, yesterday’s were accompanied by saturation media coverage, accompanied by prejudicial headlines. The *Australian’s* front-page story was entitled: “Army base terror plot foiled: Somali Islamists planned suicide raid on Australian soil”. The newspaper had been tipped off in advance about the timing of the arrests and had struck an agreement with the AFP to hold the story until yesterday.

Before a single charge was laid, let alone anyone convicted, the *Australian* reported: “Authorities believe the group is at an advanced stage of preparing to storm an Australian Army base, using automatic weapons, as punishment for Australia’s military involvement in Muslim countries. It is understood the men plan to kill as many soldiers as possible before they are themselves killed.”

Today’s editorial went further, describing the men as “fanatical Islamists” and “alleged would-be mass murderers” who had planned to stage a “cowardly attack” on Australian soldiers. The editorial declared that the police deserved the “heartfelt gratitude” of all Australians for foiling a suicide mission. The events, it claimed, reinforced the need to pursue the war in Afghanistan and rejects calls for the repeal of “strong anti-terror laws”.

The arrests followed similar developments in the US. Last month, the US Justice Department unsealed an indictment in Minneapolis against two young Somali-Americans, thus initiating the first major terrorism-related prosecution under the Obama administration. As in Australia, they have been accused of joining Al Shabaab (see: “Somali-Americans subjected to first Obama ‘terror’ prosecution”).

Like the US media, their Australian counterparts are boosting the police case by portraying Al Shabaab as a

major new terrorist threat. According to the *Australian*: “Intelligence analysts warn that Somalia has become the new breeding for international Islamic terrorists, as extremists seek revenge for the events of December 2006, when US-backed forces from Christian Ethiopia toppled the hardline government known as the Islamic Courts Union.”

In fact, the Bush administration sent US Special Forces troops to assist the Ethiopian army to invade Somalia, and then defended the invasion as a front in the global war on terror.

Human Rights Watch reported that the ouster of the Islamic regime, which had brought relative stability to the country after 15 years of warlordism, was marked by the shelling of civilian areas, killings, the burning of villages, widespread sexual violence, arbitrary detentions and torture and hostage-taking to compel families to turn in relatives suspected of involvement in the resistance to foreign occupation.

It is this brutality—US-sponsored state terrorism—that has enraged Somalis at home and abroad and apparently prompted some to fight the regime through Al Shabaab, which is regarded by many as a movement of national resistance.

Like the Obama administration, the Rudd government is trying to exploit the results of the US-backed invasion of Somali for its own political purposes—to justify its commitment of troops to the neo-colonial occupation of Afghanistan and the maintenance and strengthening of anti-democratic “terrorism” laws at home.



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